

THE BANKER'S CRIME.

Diamond Cut Diamond.

BY NATHAN D. URBNER.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE FACE IN THE FLASH.

"What? Where? I see nothing!" said Boncourt, as he rushed to the window. "The flash was gone in an instant, distinct as it was, said Adele, still remaining erect, and with her hand pointing, as the landau suddenly came to a stop."

"Then there came three or four more flashes in swift succession. 'There, there, now look!' she cried again. 'But no—it is gone—it has vanished as quickly as it came!' she added, sinking back into her seat, with a sigh of relief. 'Oh, it was too, too dreadful!'

Boncourt had remarked nothing in the flashes, except that she was very pale, and was pressing her hand to her heart. 'Hurry on, Francois! Brûlez le chemin, or we're in for a darning!' he cried, and the landau started again, with the horses' heads turned, with a laugh, to his sister, saying, 'I gave you credit for better nerve, Adele. Of course, it was but an hallucination.'

"No! No! Speak not of it, Alphonse. Mon Dieu! that face in the flash—it glared from the lurid smoke—like a demon's face from a nightmare! There was another face beside it, too—a face that I recognized!"

"Describe them."

"No, no; not now; we will be soon home; wait till we get there. Ciel! what a minute!"

"The minute, Jasmine Lodge was now close at hand, though but little rain was to accompany the tempest. But by the time the shelter of the piazza was reached a tremendous gale was rushing in from the sea, and the lashing of the surf on the beach below the gate, and the wind amid the trees."

"See that everything's under cover, Francois," called out Boncourt in French, as both Adele and he were in the habit of addressing the servants; and then, as they were passing through the hall, he asked his valet, Manue, who had admitted them, if every one was within doors."

"All but le petit-grand Dip," was the valet's reply, grinningly applying a designation which the small prodigy from over the seas had already earned for himself in below-stairs circles."

"What's out of the window?" said the master, giving Francois his hat and cane. "Where the deuce can the boy be?"

Francois had not the least idea, but was hazarding a facetious suggestion that le petit-grand Dip might have been blown away, or drowned in the rain-drops, when Madame Marlowe, who had been on upstairs, called to her brother that he could follow her into her boudoir."

When he entered it, a minute or two later, she had already partly undressed, with the assistance of her maid, and was reclining in a fauteuil, with the signs of a disturbed disturbance still in her face and manner."

"You can return to me presently, Manue," said she, dismissing the maid with a gesture; and then Boncourt seated himself before her, with an air of mock curiosity."

"For your disclosure, ma petite," said he, smiling. "The face in the flash? Come, what was it like?"

"Like a demon's—like a female fiend!" said Adele, with a slight shudder. "But if you don't become serious right off, Alphonse, I shall say nothing more."

Boncourt at once became gravely attentive."

"Oh, Alphonse, it was dreadful—appalling!" she went on, hurriedly. "And there were two faces—two figures—together, as I told you. The flash of lightning revealed them to me crouched under the trees and rocks at the roadside; and I distinctly saw the lightning gleam, that moment attracted by some distant and ominous sounds—and then, though almost at the same instant, they both lifted their faces, and their eyes encountered mine."

"Fleeing as was the flash, the lineaments of both were distinctly, steadily revealed to me. One I recognized; the other—oh, Alphonse, it was terrible! Though shrouded by the lightning glare, it seemed illuminated also by an interior fire of its own—by a sort of leaping inner balefulness, that embodied every evil passion, and seemed to fairly scorch me with its menacing hate and vindictiveness!"

"But what was it like?"

"It resembled something in my memory—something in the face of a man—and yet I could not, not then, I now, identify it in my recollections. Imagine a face, old, wrinkled, and fagged, and with time; imagine it lighted up and distorted with every inexpressible and passionate, bitter, savage, vengeful, demonic; and then imagine all this concentrated upon me as one threatening, blazing glance, that still seems to sear me to the soul! Ah, I shall never, never forget it!"

Boncourt moved a little uneasily in his chair, as her words recalled a face and look, somewhat similar to those described, which he had himself encountered not long before; but, for certain reasons of his own, he decided not to mention the circumstances to his sister."

"But you were furnished a clue to its identity," said he. "Whose was the other face that you recognized?"

"The face of Miss Winford, the old banker's housekeeper."

"The deuce! Are you sure?"

"Positively. Her face is likewise fagged, as you know, and not likely to be mistaken for another, even in a lightning flash. But, pitted and ugly as it is, it shone in contrast with the terrible countenance that glared upon me."

"Think no more of all this, Adele, or treat it as a fanciful apparition."

"But what could have brought the staid, goody-goody Miss Winford into such an association? Some discreet questions put to her might clear up the mystery."

"Leave them to me, I have no good can come of it! My duty is bidden! Only a face in a flash—perhaps some wandering maniac's wild face raised to yours by the merest chance—and the rest, the significance of it, and all that, supplied by your excited imagination! It is very early, but go to sleep at once, ma belle, and forget all about it!"

She murmured an acquiescence, and touched a bell-rop for the recall of her maid, as she received the good-night kiss that her brother seldom forgot to bestow."

As the latter was thoughtfully re-descending the stairs, the lad Dip entered by the front door, dipping his head, and somewhat disheveled by the wind, but otherwise with no abatement of his comical self-profession."

"Where have you been, you rascal?" growled his master."

"Hunting spies out of the palatial grounds, my liege, was the true thing; response, accompanied by the triumphant sound of a revolver from underneath his jacket. 'Bad luck, though—two patent cartridges burned up, and nary a spy bagged!'

"Not trifle. What do you mean?"

"Half an hour after you went out to drive, sir, I detected two men lurking among the laburnums—one of 'em, I'm

sure, was the one I mentioned as having crept out at the point of the pistol once before."

"He! the lawyer's clerk?"

"Yes, sir. I've been chasing, hunting, and doling of him ever since, but all for nothing, as you say to say, after drugging two shots."

"I heard no shots."

"Bless you, sir! I hardly heard 'em myself, for the rumbling of the storm was kicking up at the time—a regular cyclone."

"Go to bed, you rascal, and let this be the last of your pistol practice in these grounds," said Boncourt, restraining a smile. "English customs are widely different from those of the Pacific Slope of North America, you'll find."

But as the lad was moving away he recalled him. "Did you chance to see anyone else in the vicinity of the house here to-night—two women, for instance, not young, and neither of them well-favored?"

"Nary a notion, my lord, good, bad, or indifferent, old or young, besting or ugly, fat or scrawny, and I'm sure my lord, claudesire, roundy-voiced could hardly be expected on a night like this, and—"

"That will do, Dip."

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AUNT JOAN'S HOUSEHOLD.

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It had hardly disappeared in the growing dusk before the young lady was rejoined by her father, and at the same time the widow came out again to the gate, accompanied by her two sons."

"The young man acquired himself better than his daughter had hoped for in making his acknowledgments to Aunt Joan's hospitable kindness, and then Gwendoline asked him whom it was that he had stopped to speak to on the road."

"It was Mr. Croak," said Mr. Croak himself, "and Mr. Alworth, not without some eagerness," said Mr. Alworth, "seems really contrite for what has occurred—wants his proposition to remain open—is willing to forgive and forget, whenever you shall see fit to reconsider."

Gwendoline burst into a laugh, the better to abstain from an agnition of the fact that she had been the cause of the blushing of mortification that she felt mantling her cheeks."

"Never another word upon that subject, you dear, good, tiresome papa, or you and I must quarrel furiously," she cried. "And how would such a state of affairs suit Aunt Joan, who is to be our landlady hereafter, either Peter and Paul here, who are to be our fellow boarders? Run into the cottage now, and I will give you a piece of good news—a fragrant piece of news, that shall give you all the beautiful flowers you can pick or smell, for, please many a day to come!"

"You're right in, for there is a storm in the air," said Aunt Joan, opening the gate. "You will find your rooms ready for you. Paul and Peter have stowed away all your effects, and Christie thoroughly aired the rooms yesterday."

But there was another interruption, as Gwendoline and the others were passing into the garden."

At that moment a man hesitatingly approached, crossing the road from the loose foot-steps of the opposite cliff, in which he might have been lurking, when Madame Marlowe, who had been on upstairs, called to her brother that he could follow her into her boudoir."

When he entered it, a minute or two later, she had already partly undressed, with the assistance of her maid, and was reclining in a fauteuil, with the signs of a disturbed disturbance still in her face and manner."

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